



THE time for

As the business world prepares to get moving again, here are 10 things that you might have missed about Thailand during the past 12 months.

Plus: a taste of what to look forward to this decade.



THAILAND

1

Open for trade

INNOVATION RICE TO ROBOTICS

Thailand's rapid implementation of 5G (see 'Connectivity') comes as the country is seeking to move up the World Bank's ranking for ease of doing business. Currently at number 21, the Thai government announced in December its goal of breaking into the top 10 by next year. Thailand 4.0 is a long-term industrial policy to transform the country into a regional hub for innovation and advanced manufacturing. The Global Innovation Index 2020, an annual ranking compiled by the World Intellectual Property Organization and Cornell University, currently ranks Thailand first for business R&D globally and 44th overall. It also tops the list for the percentage of total exports that are classified as "creative".



SCIENCE GROWING YOUR OWN

Thailand is actively participating in the fight against the pandemic. Siam Bioscience is partnering with UK counterpart AstraZeneca to manufacture millions of doses of the vaccine developed by Oxford University for use in Southeast Asian countries. Thai scientists are also working on homegrown alternatives. One promising candidate being developed by Baiya Phytopharm and Chulalongkorn University uses low-nicotine tobacco leaves. The start-up has already developed a rapid coronavirus test kit. They are now applying the same plant-based technology to boost immunity. Final-stage trials are due to take place this year with a vaccine expected by the end of 2021.



Thailand's leadership role in Asean came to the fore during the past 12 months, from producing vaccines to being the first to roll out 5G. Connectivity has been critical for businesses through the pandemic. **But innovation will continue to require talented people to be able to come together in the same place.**



SMART VISAS WARM WELCOME

A "smart visa" programme was launched in 2018 to make it easier for foreign executives, entrepreneurs and their families to live and work in Thailand. Valid for up to four years, applying for the scheme is simple and it removes some of the common frustrations that come with working abroad. Officials are now pushing to extend the smart visa programme to freelancers, or digital nomads, who can work remotely for foreign employers while living in popular Thai cities, such as Chiang Mai and Phuket. The idea is to create a deep pool of international know-how in Thailand, which can contribute to, and collaborate with, the country's domestic talent.



INFRASTRUCTURE LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

With train travel's green credentials in the global spotlight, Thailand is already on the right track. Bangkok's highly anticipated Bangsue Grand Station is preparing to open this year and it is set to become the largest station in Southeast Asia, increasing passenger capacity to support commuter and intercity trains as well as the city's ever-expanding subway network and Thailand's highspeed train line. The latter will run from the capital to Nong Khai in the northeast, eventually connecting with neighbouring Laos and Kunming in southern China.



CONNECTIVITY HIGH FIVE

Thailand became the first member of Asean to launch a 5G commercial service last year. Telecoms providers accelerated their planned rollout of the technology just as the pandemic saw businesses switch to remote working and virtual meetings. Commercial districts in Bangkok were prioritised in the first phase along with the Eastern Economic Corridor, a special economic zone spanning three provinces to the east of the capital. The 5G network will be a major boost for the digital economy and smart industries that require highspeed connections and huge amounts of data. Thailand started 2021 with the fastest broadband speeds in the world and it's making rapid headway in mobile.

2.

Rich in care

HOSPITALITY FIVE-STAR SERVICE

High-end hotels have been rolling out their red carpets in Bangkok despite the global slowdown in travel. A roster of top global hospitality brands debuted in the Thai capital last year, readying for the return of international travel to the world's most-visited city. Five-star pair, the Four Seasons and the Capella, opened within minutes of each other on the east bank of the Chao Phraya river, just off Bangkok's bustling thoroughfare, Charoenkrung Road. Bangkok might be a little quieter than usual but business travellers will be even more spoilt for choice when they return. US group Standard Hotels is preparing to open its first Asia hotel in Bangkok's tallest skyscraper, the Mahanakhon.



ART & CULTURE FRESH PERSPECTIVE

Five tonnes of wax had to be shipped from London to Thailand last year for the Bangkok Art Biennale, which opened in October at venues across the capital. The second edition of the festival featured a giant red sculpture by UK-Indian artist Anish Kapoor. "Push/Pull" was set in the serene surrounds of the temple of the reclining Buddha (Wat Pho). Bangkok's famous temple also played host to a work called "Invisible World" by one of Thailand's homegrown stars, Uttaporn Nimmalaikaew. The country's contemporary art scene is grabbing more attention and there's plenty to see beyond Bangkok. Thailand Biennale, a touring art festival, will be taking place in June in Korat, a city in northeast Thailand.

Quality of life in Thailand has been enriched during the past 12 months. Cultural events have showcased Thailand's talent as well as its deft handling of the pandemic. New hotels and electric ferries are ready to welcome travellers to Bangkok.

Thailand has had an active year; visitors will find plenty to catch up on.



HEALTH CARING THROUGH THE CRISIS

Thailand's world-class hospitals make it a popular destination for medical tourism. But during the pandemic, international attention shifted to its universal healthcare system and widespread community engagement. Successive governments have prioritised public health and the Thai people are equally invested at every level, from adopting simple protective measures to the one million village health volunteers who have contributed to the country's front-line workforce. This whole-of-society approach stood Thailand in good stead during the last major Sars outbreak in 2003 and it provides a strong foundation for any future challenges.



SUSTAINABILITY TURNING THE TIDE

Electric ferries are currently undergoing trials on Bangkok's main Chao Phraya river as well as the Khlong Phadung Krung Kasem canal. They could lead the way for Thailand's nationwide fleet of ships and cruisers. Smart piers are also being developed to make the waterway a reliable method of public transportation. The company behind Bangkok's electric ferries is set to open Southeast Asia's first lithium-ion battery factory. Dubbed the Tesla of Thailand, Energy Absolute plans to begin manufacturing this year, alongside research into battery recycling and the development of electric vehicles.



SOCIETY ROCK ON

Bennetty was one of the highlights of last year's Bangkok Design Week. The Thai rock band, made up of musicians and singers in their sixties, seventies and eighties, performed to a rapt audience of students. Choojai & Friends, a community-minded creative agency, came up with the idea of forming a band of retirees while working in partnership with the Thai Health Promotion Foundation. Bennetty is an entertaining way of promoting active retirement and encouraging youth engagement with the elderly. The band's first single was a surprise hit in 2018 and it's carried on ever since, changing its line-up for every release.

Thailand ushered in the new year with eco-friendly fireworks. Here are more events lighting up 2021.

01

CHART TOPPING

Thailand's stock exchange had a record-breaking 2020, cementing its position as the top location for IPOs in Southeast Asia. The Bangkok-based bourse has a strong pipeline of IPOs for 2021 and expects to add at least US\$16.5bn (€13.6bn) to its market capitalisation.

02

LOOKING GOOD

Bangkok's plush hospitals are facing some healthy competition with plans to transform the island of Phuket into an international medical-tourism hub. World-class healthcare plus some of the world's finest beaches equals an unbeatable wellness package.

03

PICTURE PERFECT

Film director to watch Nattawut Poonpiriya's latest picture *One for the Road* premiered at this year's Sundance film festival and features Chutimon "Aokbab" Chuengcharoensukying, Catch Thailand's rising star in *Happy Old Year*, Thailand's entry for this year's Oscars.

04

NATION BUILDING

Thailand's new parliament building – more than a decade in the making – is due to be inaugurated this year. Inspired by Buddhist tenets, it houses the legislative chambers of the National Assembly, museums, a convention centre and riverside public space.

05

GREENER PASTURES

Sugar cane is among the sweeteners attracting foreign businesses to Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor. It's being used to produce alternatives to polystyrene and silk. The government plans to make sustainable industries account for 25 per cent of GDP by 2025.

2021

